



AMPS/RECEIVERS

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

ELAC

ELEMENT SERIES

EA101EQ-G



For many years now we have watched with some sadness the rise of the soundbar as a 'neat' solution for TV audio and music in the lounge, when in fact they rarely deliver hi-fi performance, and in truth are not particularly neat either, once the wires are all tumbling from cramped connection bays behind them. So we are, conversely, increasingly delighted by hi-fi companies fighting back, bringing real hi-fi sound back to the lounge in compact units tailor-made for TV, music and movies. ELAC's little Element amplifier is just such a solution.

EQUIPMENT

You might be surprised to see an amplifier from ELAC — this German company is best known today for its hi-fi speakers, for the renowned JET folded ribbon tweeter, award-winning subwoofers and more. But the company's earliest roots (more than 90 years ago) were actually in sonar, and during hi-fi's golden years ELAC was known for its superb turntables and receivers, before getting more into speakers in the 1980s. Now its electronics are in resurgence again, with an anniversary turntable, a DAC, phono stage and two series of amplifiers, *Alchemy* and *Element*, the latter currently being just this little EA-101EQ-G.

It's a very neat design, just 5.5cm high, and only 21cm wide, presenting its narrowest face to the world, extending back 28cm to a rear panel which, for our money, makes the perfect choice of inputs for an amplifier seeking life in a desk or TV lounge situation — two analogue RCA pairs, two optical digital inputs, one coaxial digital, and a USB-B input that can be connected to a computer. There's also a subwoofer output.

The speaker sockets are wonderfully compact yet high quality '5-way' terminals, taking bananas, spades, bare wires, as you desire.

The front is formed by a nicely solid curved block of brushed aluminium, sporting a nice silver knob, a full-size headphone socket and just two buttons, one for power, one to shuttle through those inputs. The display is unusual, an OEL (Organic Electroluminescent) visible from wide angles even in bright light, yet without being piercing like LEDs, allowing a nice compressed font, just a little small perhaps, but clear.

The top of the unit is rubberised; indeed the design reminds us rather of an upmarket in-car amplifier. And like car amplifiers the EA-101 wears its watts on its sleeve — "80 watts per channel" boasts the manual and its web page, as if to stop you peering at the compact enclosure

with anything less than confidence. It uses BASH amplification (Bridged Amplifier Switching Hybrid), which is not a variant of Class D; the amplification itself is more like conventional Class B but with the power supply modulated by the output signal to vary the gain using PWM modulation. BASH is best known for its use in subwoofers and, yes, in-car amplifiers, and the technology is owned by a Canadian company Sonavox, which is apparently connected in more ways than one with ELAC, given we noted that the app for this amplifier is also from Sonavox.

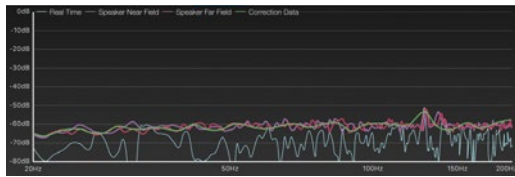
PERFORMANCE

At face value everything is so very self-explanatory that it might seem superfluous for ELAC to provide such a nice A4 book of Operating Instructions. But in fact there is plenty more here than meets the eye. Crucially its app does far more than merely shifting control from a physical remote to a software-driven touchscreen. It allows input selection, a master volume control and a useful offset control for each input, in case you have some sources louder than others.

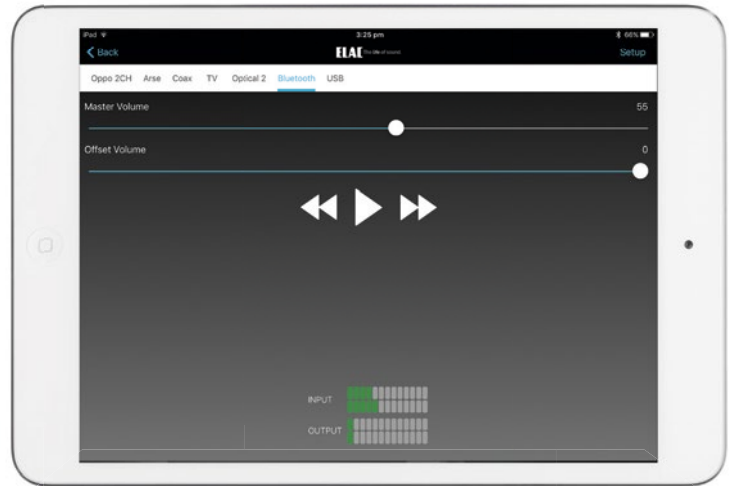
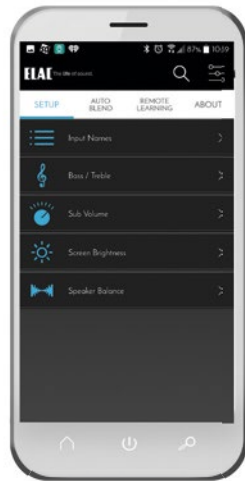
Then under Setup it has Input Naming, which allows free typing, your words displayed in that beautiful font on the display, which is, of course,



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ABOVE: Auto EQ; RIGHT: the main app interface



a marvellous chance to make your ELAC display 'Arse' or similar. The display can be dimmed via the app with 100 possible levels of brightness.

Also available in the app are sliders for bass, treble and left-right balance, for subwoofer volume if you have connected one, and then an interesting section called Auto-EQ. Regular readers will know we generally avoid the unexpected distortions that even digital EQ can bring. But this is clever. There are two flavours — Auto EQ, and Auto Blend. The Blend is for getting your subwoofer crossover right, and the EQ is room correction, comparing a test tone recorded near-field (close to the speaker) with another recorded at the listening position. Confidence is increased by seeing the two graphs laid over each other and the correction curve applied (see above). And no microphone is required — it uses your smartphone. By comparing the two positions, the ELAC can cancel out variable microphone characteristics.

The result — we liked it, and left it in circuit for much of our listening (not quite a first, but nearly). You can switch it off easily on the app, using this toggle to compare the EQ on or off.

We let the ELAC warm up on daily TV and movie duties, for which it proved an impeccable performer, fed either optically from a visiting TCL TV, or direct via analogue output from an Oppo Blu-ray player, and powering a pair of average sensitivity high-quality German (but not, apologies, ELAC) standmounters. It proved tonally impeccable, doing just what an amplifier should in getting out of the signal's way (other than making it bigger), and able to push climaxes high without apparent stress.

Moving to movies in earnest, the soaring soundtrack of the third Indiana Jones movie gave the ELAC a good workout, from the placing of tinkling war-room telephones to the wide bustle of a Turkish market and, of course, endless Indi action scenes. We indulged in some crankage with *Batman v Superman* (the Wonder Woman scenes, natch) and the ELAC held tight throughout, keeping everything well separated even within its

two-channel limitation, with apparent headroom to go as high as required. There was little to choose between the analogue and optical presentations, which says much for the ELAC's DAC, since the Oppo's is certainly a fine one. (A possible alternate interpretation of this came from a chance conversation with another reviewer, whose tests indicate that the analogue inputs are digitally sampled at 96kHz anyway, so everything will go through the same DAC eventually.)

So to music, starting in Mancunian mode with The Stone Roses' 'Second Coming' on CD through the analogue inputs. It was strangely flat at lower levels, *Driving South* and *Love Spreads* only gaining dynamics and separation once the level was up in the 60s (moderately pumping). We came right up to date with the new Gorillaz album, and while it seemed tonally accurate enough, it hardly leapt to life either. We switched to our more sensitive and larger JBLs in the music room — and if you move it, do recalibrate the Auto EQ! We had very thin sound until we realised we had transported the inverse lounge room EQ characteristic along with the amp. Recalibrated, and in fact here preferred flat, many things went well — Leonard Cohen's vocal on *Going Home* was wonderfully present with the right edgy rasp to it, the slightly soft recording of Paul McCartney's *My Valentine* was almost surprisingly tightened. This ability to brighten up recordings just stopped short of overbrightening edgy recordings, though — rather it nicely opened up the details in the recordings.

An oddity — the USB input presented high bit-rate ability to our Mac Mini up to 32-bit, but nothing over 48kHz. Yet the spec says it should be good to 24-bit/192kHz.

Finally we used Bluetooth to stream from our iPad Pro, noting that the ELAC turns up twice

in your Bluetooth list, once for Control (already connected if you're using the app) and a different one for streaming music. Happily we were able to be on both simultaneously, and although the signal was audibly deteriorated by the Bluetooth link, the lightness of touch to the ELAC's sound was here a positive boon, and in addition to stored music it made an enjoyable way to listen to Pandora and Spotify streams, with all the convenience of control from the screen.

In most situations the half-sized remote proved the easiest way to control volume, with the up and down volume top and bottom of the centre ring; the mute is actually unmarked, doubling as a play/pause button which usefully paused and restarted Bluetooth playback.

CONCLUSION

We'd recommend the ELAC's simplicity of design and hidden clever bits to anyone looking for a compact solution to pair with speakers either side of your TV, to deliver enjoyable TV and movie sound beyond that of a soundbar, and to enjoy everyday music playback streaming from your smart device or coming from your media box. ■

ELAC Element Series EA101EQ-G integrated amplifier

- Great connections for TV/desktop scenario
- Reliable performance and power
- Clever room EQ and subwoofer calibration

- Has a definite sweet spot at moderately high level

Price: \$1199

Inputs: 2 x analogue RCA, 2 x optical digital, 1 x coaxial digital, 1 x USB-B, Bluetooth (aptX)

Outputs: Subwoofer out, headphone out, speakers out

Power: 2 x 40W (8 ohms, 2 channels driven, 1kHz, THD+N=0.03%), 2 x 80W (4 ohms, 2 channels driven, 1kHz, THD+N=0.07%)

Frequency response: 20Hz-40kHz (-1.8dB)

Dimensions (whd): 210 x 54 x 295mm

Weight: 2.3kg

Contact: Synergy Audio Visual

Telephone: 03 9459 7474

Web: www.synergyaudio.com

